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By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

The increase has happened slowly, but it adds up over time. As the 2013-14 school year takes off, a steady stream of new students continues to enroll in USD No. 480.

“Any one year you may be handle the influx,” which averages about 80 students annually, said director of human resources and public relations Jason McAfee. “But when it happens year after year after year, you’re talking about an extra 250 students at that point. That's like adding a whole other school to the district.”

McAfee isn't exaggerating. Liberal's seven elementary schools vary in size, but each enrolls between 200 and 250 students. Preliminary numbers for Garfield Elementary list student enrollment at 257; at MacArthur, the number is 190; Lincoln lists 235 students.

Those figures aren't final, either. As of Wednesday, the district had 82 more students enrolled than it did roughly a year ago. That number is likely to fluctuate between now and the official count day Sept. 20.

"Where we stood yesterday afternoon is never where we stand a week later. I get a daily update, and will continue to do that for the next couple weeks," McAfee said. "We set July 30 and 31 as the days to enroll, but not everybody comes in." People may be on vacation, out of town, or in the process of moving. Whatever the reason, McAfee said, "they continue to come to enroll. So our numbers go up daily."

Students by the numbers
Official Count Day
enrollment:
2009 — 4,463
2010 — 4,559
2011 — 4,631
2012 — 4,703
2013 (unofficial, as of
Aug. 21) — 4,785

As classrooms max out, the district encounters a second problem: where to place the newly-arrived students.

"That's the hardest part, I guess," said McAfee, "finding out how we're going to fit all these kids into the buildings. It gets down to the point where we have a kid who needs to be in a classroom somewhere, and we're asking, 'do we have enough space? How are we going to fit this child in?' It's not pleasant."

According to district policy, the first option is to keep students in their neighborhood schools. If space is tight, however, transfers become an option.

"If we could keep every student in his or her neighborhood school, we would. But we don't have the facilities to accommodate it at this time," McAfee said, noting that with 481 newly-enrolled kindergarten students, the district has already had to shift one classroom from MacArthur

Elementary to McKinley Elementary for a new afternoon session.

When a classroom is overflowing, the district often must issue transfers to some of the students. The decision-making process involves several factors:

- Is the student attending a school with siblings? If so, the district tries not to split family groups.
- Is the student receiving special education, physical therapy or gifted services that require an Individual Education Plan (IEP)? If so, the district tries not to transfer.
- Has the student attended the same school for a number of years? If so, the district prefers to keep the student in place.
- Is the student a new enrollment at that building? If so, a transfer may be assigned.

Students eligible for transfer are listed in a lottery, and selected randomly. When several students from the same school must be transferred, the district tries to place them in the same new school as a group.

“The idea is that hopefully, if I’m the one who has to transfer, maybe some of my friends will go with me,” said McAfee. “We’ve thought it through down to that level.”

Even then, it’s not welcome news for families.

“I’ve had parents call me, and they want to voice their concerns and their displeasure. I listen to them. That’s part of my job,” McAfee said. “I have a daughter who started kindergarten this year, and we live across the street from her school. She could have potentially been transferred to another school, and if we had to do that, it would have upset my wife a whole lot.” Even so,

he added, "I would have been the one to sign off on that. My point is, I understand. It's not easy."

Over the past three years, the district has reduced the number of transferred students from 100 to less than 50. With the largest-ever group of students beginning their educational journey, however, McAfee foresees more juggling in the future, starting with this academic year.

"By Sept. 20, we will have the official number of students, that our funding is based on," he said. "That's the day the state uses to determine our official enrollment, so it's very important that all the students in the district show up to school that day, because that's how it's figured: who's actually in class on count day."

In past years, new students continue to flow into the district throughout the school year. However, funding is fixed on a per-pupil method, based on the Sept. 20 count.

"It's an important day in the district," he said. "We'll see what the numbers turn out to be."

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